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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Israeli Arab Town of Shefa' amr Rolls out the Welcome Mat for Tel Aviv Visa Unit Employees

1. Summary. In an effort to enhance the decision-making process for visa adjudicators interviewing applicants from Israel's minority Arab communities, Tel Aviv's Visa Unit recently organized a professional day trip to the Israeli Arab town of Shefa'amr. Twenty-four Foreign Service Officers, Consular Associates and Locally Engaged Staff participated in the high level visit, arranged by a local businessman and educational activist. A senior lecturer from Tel Aviv University delivered a background lecture on Israeli-Arab issues prior to the visit. Not only did the day succeed in breaking down negative stereotypes and building human bridges, but it also gave first-hand context for making visa decisions for an applicant pool that represents one of the more marginalized segments of Israel's multi-ethnic society. End Summary.

2. As a scene-setter leading up to the visit to Shefa'amr, the consular section invited a J-1 visa recipient and research scholar, Professor Eliezer Rekness, Senior Research Fellow at Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, to give a lecture. Dr. Rekness, Director of the Program on Arab Politics in Israel, specializes in the political history of the Arabs in Israel, the Islamic resurgence in Israel and Palestinian affairs. Not only did he increase the staff's interest in participating in the professional day but he also enhanced their knowledge by providing basic demographic information and a broad socio-economic context.

3. The Arabic name of the town, Shefa'amr, means "the spring of Omar," and refers to the sweet spring water that supplies the city. Its Hebrew name, Shefa'am that means the "trumpeting of the people," harkens to the period two thousand years ago when the Jewish religious court known as the Sanhedrin left Jerusalem and settled nearby. The fact that the town has two names epitomizes its complicated history as an Arab village in a Jewish state. Its current inhabitants are all Arabs whose religious composition is 55% Muslim, some of whom are Bedouin; 30% Christian and 15% Druze.

4. On the day of the visit, renowned Arab hospitality was on full display when Non-Immigrant and Immigrant visa staff members arrived at the Israeli-Arab town of Shefa'amr, a municipality of 35,000 inhabitants, nestled into the hills northeast of Haifa. Our guide and host, the local owner of a coffee and spice-processing factory that employs some 40 workers, Mr. Samer Nachly, arranged a cross-sectarian visit that included a recently constructed mosque, a hundred year old church, a Druze meeting hall and, even the town's abandoned synagogue, whose Muslim caretaker prides himself for ensuring that the building's infrastructure endures. The town's Jewish inhabitants left the mixed town for Haifa in the early 1920's to work in the refinery and chemical factories.

5. Concrete results of grass-roots activism can be found in an elementary school building that is being constructed with private funds. We learned that the Government of Israel (GOI) provides infrastructure and tuition funds for the town's government schools but, for private education, covers only 65% of the tuition. A group of Christian parents, whose children attended a church-funded school, have raised monies for a new building after a wall of the old school collapsed one night...thankfully sparing their children any injuries. While new proposals of the controversial Dovrat Commission would increase GOI funding of private schools to the same 100% received by public schools, these parents prefer to retain control of their curriculum, methodology, and unique minority environment, so our host believes they will reject the offer.

6. During the visit, Consular staff also met the following people: the town's mayor; the Arab deputy director of Internal Medicine at Haifa's Rambam Medical Center; a pantomime artist who is the director of the country's first pantomime group from an Israeli Arab town; the director of the country's first and only Ministry of Education sanctioned Arab conservatory; local educators, women and university students.

17. Among the issues discussed during the day were the financial and social problems that Israel's Christian citizens face as a minority within a minority. While some young Israeli Christian Arabs hope that performing voluntary military service might mean better job opportunities and integration, older members of the community voice great skepticism based on the tenuous socio-economic status of the country's Druze and Bedouin -- communities that must serve in the military.

18. Comment: On solely economic grounds, it is difficult for Israeli-Arab applicants to overcome the presumption of intending immigrant status due to their marginalization in Israeli society. As a result of this professional day visit to the vibrant town of Shefa'amr, consular officers now have a broader, deeper perspective on the close social and family ties within Arab communities which may supplement economic conditions as compelling reasons for applicants to return from travel to the U.S. and more illustrative social context within which to make visa adjudications. End Comment.
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